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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the social and cultural impact of a distance education program offered by a Colombian university. The EDI distance education program for teachers was proposed as an alternative to reach geographical zones distant from the large cities and labor groups that have difficulties being admitted to conventional universities. It was also conceived as a regional promoter of social change. Among the objectives of the program was the transformation of the Antiochian province of Colombia. The main effect of the program is, of course, on the professional work of the teacher. Until government by the people becomes a reality, the teacher must play a role in the process of consultation and change to try to alter the values he or she has represented and consider school as a determinant of the social change rate. In its 5 years of operation, the program has served 2,935 students. The growth of the program indicates its importance as a democratizing agent. Participation in higher education in the province has increased. Student test results from the province have improved, reflecting positive impacts from the program. The attitude of the community has been favorable, and overall, findings suggest that the distance education program should be continued. (Contains 121 references.) (SLD)

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Social Impact on Education, Community, Collaboration and Research on Distance Education

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SOCIAL IMPACT ON EDUCATION, COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION AND RESEARCH ON DISTANCE EDUCATION.

By: Dr. Claudio-Rafael Vasquez-Martinez et al. University of Guadalajara

1.1 FUNCTION OF EDUCATION WITHIN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE.

When observing the evolution of Latin-American education, it can be proven how the latter has been reduced to a transmission of contents and values in agreement with the social, economic and political characteristics dominant in each moment.

Historically, the tendency of formal education to disregard the socioeconomic realities of Latin-America, to maintain the training of the educators at a low level and to employ contents and methodologies which have become limited or else to collect rules and values inherited from the past, or else to import technologies not always appropriate, is also observed. As Jairo Acevedo states: "Insofar the state is the expression of power of a dominant class, bourgeoisie, the scholastic institution appears as mediator and distributor of culture and the forms of the "knowledge" of that class. When this reality is disregarded and the school is perceived as the institution in which the global culture crystallizes, it is natural that

the contents, its values and its implicit messages are accepted as unquestionable truths, which by being such, must be introjected. Precisely the guidelines of those derive from the fact of perceiving them as the expression of the feeling of the majority made official in the scholastic apparatus". (Mimeo).

The teacher has acted as a professional prepared to contribute to the consecration of the validity of the society which he or she serves, in which the system has been the result of the interests of some groups and social classes and the opinion of the educator has had little or nothing to do, as an influence factor, in the conformation of those. Moreover, the traditional passive attitude of most educators stands out, as they resign to the status of mere agents of consolidation of the interests of dominant social groups.

Latin-American education has moved mainly within a range of consecration of the schemes of cultural, social and economic dependence. Education, determined by the concurrence of extra-academic interests, has contributed to a great extent to emphasize the gap between the privileged classes and the traditionally deprived sectors. (World Bank).

When allusion is made in the present context to sector, to social stratum, it is important to notice with Briones (Mimeo), that "the relationships established between stratification and education are located on the formal plane, by strata being arbitrary fictions, while the relationship between the terms education-social classes is specified on the plane of the definite, of the historically constituted".

That is, while one tries to determine a problematic relationship of education with respect to social issues, the possibility for elucidation is lost, when using the notion of social stratum, instead of the concept of social class.

1.2 EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE.

Thinking in global terms about education and social change, it can be proposed that "if we compare the present world with the one a hundred years ago it is evidenced that the social, technical, scientific and political changes occurred in it are great, but that in the order of education they have been comparatively small. This lag of the school is due, in part, to the fact that it is not easy to adjust a teaching system to changes which are not provided for in its objectives, plans and programs, for the school has not been considered an agent of economic, technical and social development, that is, promoter of changes, and so it has only fulfilled a function of adaptation in order to survive" (Reissig, 1961). Nonetheless, it must be understood that the dynamics of society are given by the development of contradictions and that by means of their clash and movement other characteristics are created, changes and transformations take place. In that approach, for the Latin-American case, what education has done is belatedly adapt to some changes, lingering, in terms of Ponce, in mere "procedure by which the dominant classes prepare in the mentality and behavior of children the conditions of their own existence" (Ponce, 1980). Since, in the class war, "the dominant class as far as possible does nothing else but sustain itself taking advantage of all its bodies

such as the army, the police, education, etc.; the class which dominates materially is also the one which dominates with its morals, its education and its ideas" (Ponce, 1980).

However, this is not the only retrievable function of education. It can immediately and in the short term be the determinant; but one cannot disregard its role as trainer of professionals, of qualified labor and its function in training on general skills, among them analysis, the capability of understanding the social totality, the critical capability and the ability to formulate alternative proposals in each problematic situation. No matter how neutral it pretends to be, education develops in its users and in the community which receives its effects, skills which can turn it into a stimulating factor of the conscience-raising on the problems of each one.

It can, also, generate innovations, social tendencies which start appearing in the community mainly if we talk about higher education, because this is the level at which social protest and change arise more interest. Today much is insisted on linking the university with social problems and change and it is difficult to find anyone to oppose this premise. The university itself suggests as its own function the analysis of the problems of society and the contribution to its transformation through political, economic, scientific, technological and social conceptions, within a cultural setting of its own, the assimilation of which comes to alter, little by little, the social structure.

With no doubt, then, the present times are characterized by the tenseness between tradition and change and by the swiftness with which social changes occur. One of the social components receptor of the tension is precisely the education institution which is forced to review the concept of education itself and the role which it has been playing in the process of social formation during the last decades.

Anyway it is important to recognize that the educational process occurs in the scene of a particular social reality and that in some way, intentional and systematically, or through its qualified product, it sets itself up as a encouraging factor of society, if not the determinant factor.

In a general sense education is considered, in the context discussed, as an integral part of a larger system, in which "the part as well as the whole act one time as cause and another as effect; education affects the global system and the latter, in turn, causes or occasions basic, quantitative characteristics of the education system" (Briones, 1978). And, while this reciprocal causality and interacting relationship occur it is obvious that, because of its primary socializing function, social structure, along with its components and resultants, wields in the last analysis the main effect; the influence of education resulting referred to its relative position in the system and to the action of the secondary functions which can slowly be cracking the structure.

By being the social system marked by the class war, battle which reflects on the educational field in the official sector's divisions – private sector, academic modality – technical modality and maybe presential modality also – distance modality, the analysis which can be done on the external impact of the EDI program should be placed in this context. From that, then, the understanding of the dynamics of distance education should depart from the fundamental relationship education –social class and which modality for which class.

In the case of the present analysis, the occupational characteristic of EDI's users, 95% are teachers, is related with their education aspirations, graduate programs and with an intention more of improvement of education than of social ascending, since the majority is, in terms of work, in the education sector. It remains difficult, then, to carry out an analysis differentiated by courses or university options to validate the assertion that "the structure of classes determines the differences in access to education, and the dynamics of the education system in general" (Cataño, 1978). Some distance education programs offered by Colombia are on teacher training and on technologies. The ideas of those who foresee the extinction of social differences through the capability of the system to reach all the regions and all the social sectors through innovations such as Distance Education, can, then, be catalogued as optimistic.

For those who conceive education as one of the key mechanisms in the promotion of social equality, the expansion of education will directly affect the democratization of occupational opportunities and the increase of the social

mobility processes. This approach, according to Cataño, means holding the "educational chances" responsible as causes of the class differences within society, while identifying social inequality with "educational chances" inequality (1978).

As Cataño explains it, in Colombia the expansion rate of the occupational structure in not parallel to that of the production of the education system. Argument which comes to confront the notion of social mobility so extended in its optimistic connotation in the analyses which assign larger specific weigh to education. To the argument on mobility Parra responds that "education is not, then, a channel but a valve which restrains the promotion of the lower strata and keeps the higher strata up" (Parra, 1980). These approaches could be synthesized saying that the effort of establishing direct relation between education and social success, obeys a kind of concealing conceptualization of tendentious ideological manipulation.

The EDI program is directed basically to teachers in service. This is, groups already positioned professionally and socially and which will therefore have a relative economic improvement, but in no way promotion to different social strata.

Relating the previous observations, Briones concludes that, in a stratified society, the years of schooling exert a smaller influence on the income of people, if schooling is considered independently from social origin, origin which also affects the relation between income and the work experience. In the same direction argue

Lebot (1979) and Parra Sandoval (1979), who insist on the fact that the effects of education are not independent from the entire economic and social setting and therefore an association of the income levels with the schooling levels cannot be derived in a simplistic way, just as, for example, Selowsky, Dougherty and Schultz (1979), do; the latter establish high profitability rates stemming from elementary schooling at a private as well as at an official level, and reach the point of displaying an annual profitability of 75% for elementary schooling in contrast with 50% for university schooling, while Mark Blaug (1979), establishes a direct correlation between instruction and profit, exalting his conclusions to a generalization level. Briones, accepting such thing as starting point, proposes a much more specific analysis which incorporates in itself a social formation in which distinct social origins or socioeconomic levels happen and differentiate. He demonstrates how the relationship behaves in a special manner when schooling and income correlate in persons who have the same socioeconomic origin, meaning then, a rate of return corresponding more to socioeconomic origin than to schooling.

In agreement with this scene, the social impact of education must be sought in the effects which, on the understanding of society, its problems and solutions, the educated people experiment. When considering the social changes attributable to education, one must count with the fact that the methodic distribution of knowledge to more than one personality forming function, awakens the critical spirit (Faure et al., 1978), spirit which on the long run will bear as a result the change of what does not adjust to the new signs of times.

The diverse approaches, independently from the theoretical approach which rules them, clarify the correlation between the transforming action of education in specific spaces and historical moments which demand alternatives. As Faure states (1978), "education, by the knowledge it provides of the environment where it is exercised, can help society to take conscience of its own problems and, on condition of directing its efforts to the formation of complete men, consciously compromised in the change of their collective and individual emancipation, it can contribute to the transformation and humanization of societies".

1.3 THE DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM AND THE SOCIOCULTURAL CHANGE OF THE PROVINCE

It is important to point out that the Antiochian province, space where the EDI program develops, faces, in comparison with the metropolitan area, serious disadvantages with respect to the infrastructure of culture promoting centers, since, like other regions, the Colombian social circle centralizes the administrative, cultural and intellectual activities in the great capital city of the department, making the geographical isolation correspond with the cultural and intellectual isolation. It cannot be disregarded that in distant rural areas centers intended for that purpose exist, but their quality renders impossible a convenient access and abundant

education, training or updating of the teachers in agreement with the bibliography demanded by the topics which EDI works with.

Studying the Cultural and Recreational Inventory of Antioch (Department of Education and Culture of Antioch, 1985), it is found that different education districts possess cultural establishments, libraries, artistic groups and periodical display of cultural events, as well as sports sceneries and events and recreational infrastructure. What is incomparable with the resources of metropolitan areas, is the quality and variety of the communal libraries and specialized libraries and the variety observed in the rest of the fields aforesaid. If some large municipalities with certain cultural background as Marinilla, Rionegro, Andes, are excluded, the difference is notorious in favor of the metropolitan centers and the adjacent municipalities, in the quality as well as in the quantity of the share which reflects on the variety of groups, contests or events and program planning which take place in them; museums, specialized libraries, exhibit halls, sports settings, etc. This reality hinders on one hand the proper development of the program, but on the other hand it allows foreseeing the greater impact or projection that innovations as Distance Education will have on the province, if they stabilize and qualify.

The modality of Distance Education as an innovation in Colombian education, has been proposed as an alternative to reach geographical zones distant from the large cities and labor groups which have difficulties to be admitted into the conventional university. It is conceived also as regional promoter of social change.

In agreement with the former approaches on the function of education, it was explored up to what point Distance Education which appears as a democratizing alternative, has generated or at least promoted transformations in society; up to what point diverse social impacts are insinuated, such as trends or tendencies induced by the program or by the user which in any way can generate changes at educational, social, economic or political level. Does the distance program operate as a strengthener of the usual relations or as transformation factor of them? In the last analysis is the EDI program promoting social development by means of its transforming impact on the community or, on the contrary, nothing has happened and the education system and society continue to remain intact and strengthened when extending the former to more zones and people its traditional function, and then, just as Robert Arnove states in one of his researches referring to previous changes: "at the end of the national front the existing elitist systems, the social and educational in this case, not only remained intact but strengthened, confirming this way the famous French adage: "The more things change the more they remain the same" (Arnove, 1978)"?

This study, however, as it has already been insinuated, departs from the basic assumption according to which, for minimal its impact may be, education influences social change, promotes transformation.

We must specify here that the approach that was followed for the analysis of the social impact was more related with the changes produced by the

EDI program on the social structure in which it acts, without neglecting the inverse effects, of the social structure on the program. It means, therefore, that the relation starting from the program, this is, of the effect which the latter has on the conformation of the relationships between the different social groups in some way bound to it is analyzed. Basically the effect on the identification of the users with their business, their trade problems and the critical conscience of the particular conditions in which they develop as individuals and in relation to those who surround them was analyzed.

Continuing the approaches provided in the Assessment of the UNIDES project, Volume III (Arboleda et al., 1976), the sense of the academic activity for the individual is conceived, in terms of practical significance, that is, in terms of the specific repercussion on the individual and its group, as a real impact on the educational. We depart, then, from the premise according to which the first impact of the EDI program, program of teachers, should be sought in the introduction of substantial changes in the contents of education, in its quality and connection with work and the specific applications for the professional, social, political and personal life of its users. We must point out the fact that the main effect is on the professional work of the teacher and the quality of this work as a way of dialectic combination of theory with practice, of study and work. As a side effect of this impact a permanent reflux will come up between these two spheres of reality which will allow the student to take a position before the reality in which he or she moves, for although it is true that in every social formation the functions of education are given in correspondence with the reproduction of the existing production

relationships and with the training of qualified work force required by the system for its best operation, one must also take into account that this central function of conservation becomes, in a certain moment, a reproducer of social contradictions. And, even if education cannot lead to a change in social relations, it can succeed in leading the individual to question his ideas-representations: this means, the ideas about himself, about the world which surrounds him, about his social relations and class situation. Then, while the quality of education improves, change is promoted in other orders, when facing reality critically.

In consequence with this position, the educational effect of the program was privileged in the present assessment.

1.3.1 The user of Distance Education as promoter of change

Until government by the people becomes a reality, the teacher must play his or her role in a process of consultation and change which tries to alter the same values which he or she has represented and consider school as determinant of the social change rate (Linch and Plunkett, 1977).

Bibliography that allows a view on the problems of Distance Education and its product, in relation with its influence on the community, in terms of social impact, is still scarce. And as Rodrigo Parra Sandoval points out, "the fundamental absence of a general, broad and comprehensive study, which theoretically

identifies the different aspects which affect the teacher's activity, as well as the social changes that the Colombian teacher induces, is notorious (Parra Sandoval, 1980)".

It is traditionally considered that the fundamental function of the educator is social conservation, this is working in consequence with the pre-established lineaments stipulated by society through its organisms and institutions. In the theoretical aspect of the previous considerations, however, queries about the validity of this position were posed and the function of change facilitation was emphasized. The EDI program includes among its objectives the transformation of the province. It is valid then to ask after five years of operation: what has the contribution of the users of the program been to the quality of education, be it on the student or on the community? What is the contribution of the program in the formation of independent study habits? And if such contribution exists, how does it appear and under what conditions? We attempt to see the user "as agent of change", when he makes his pupils continuously think on their reality, on the possibilities of transformation of their environment, by removing the fear of looking for solutions to their problems with the rest, by not considering his pupils as objects or spectators of formation, but as authors and actors of their personal history and of the general history (Depienne, 1970).

A variable which cannot be ignored in this confrontation about change, is the socio-geographical area in which the teacher operates. It, in terms of regions of the province more or less distant and more or less convulsed, where the task

performed by the user of EDI, as bearer of certain leadership in such work place, can be appreciated more clearly. Although the condition of leader or promoter of social change of the teacher is a long way away today from being what it was some years ago, an essential aspect of the characterization of the rural teacher and of his or her expectations of achievement, when he or she has gone through public university and has been exposed to the compromise with change, is observing his or her action congruent with this information. It is attempted to see up to where the simple accumulation of knowledge memorized by the pupils, is replaced by reflections and thoughts on the lived reality and by conscious participation in the economic, social and political life of their community and of their country.

1.3.2 Projections of the Program on the community

Has the EDI program been able to operate as particular promoter and transformer of the life of the province? Are there evidences at least, that it works in such direction? Has it carried out its duty with the professionalization of educators and bachelors equally, up to adequate qualitative levels, not inferior to the presential levels? To provide answers to the previous queries, means confronting the fundamental objectives proposed by the program in the social and academic aspects.

As for coverage, a progressive advance relatively fast with respect to what was proposed at the beginning is evident. A significant piece of information is provided by the volume of 2.935 students that the program has served between 1980 and 1984. A grand total of 110 municipalities of Antioch, 6 of Cordoba, 2 in Caldas and 2 in Santander, constitutes an indicator important to the democratizing tendency of the program.

In global terms, the reduction of desertion provides proof also of the strengthening of the program and of its coverage.

Between 1972 and 1978, the participation of the Antiochian province on the biannual vacancy of the University of Antioch did not surpass 100%. With the beginning of the EDI program in 1980, this participation doubled.

The former contrasts with the preexistent situation explained by Rafael Aubad Lopez and Saul Mesa Ochoa (1982), who propose that the obstacle for admittance into Higher Education of the bachelors from the province in the University of Antioch, reflects on an under-representation of these, in relation with the graduates of the Valle de Aburrá junior high-school, which is originated by the gap between the accepted and the admitted.

And as Restrepo Gomez points out in "The aptitude tests and democratization of the admission to university" (1979), the differences of global population of the Aburrá Valley and the rest of the department are minimal (close

to 5%) in favor of Aburrá Valley, fact which does not justify the broad difference of shares in the university (80% versus 10% for the rest of Antioch).

In coverage, then, the impact of the EDI program is clear. Now then, up to what point is the Distance Education imparted to teachers of the department helping to improve qualitatively the education in the province?

In the beginning of the third semester of study a test was applied to the students, oriented to detect the student perception facing aspects such as: quality of the program, quality of the assessors, perception of the program by persons in the field, quality of the courses served and functionality of the program. The answers emitted before the test, reflect in some way the state of the program with respect to what was proposed and the impact that until that moment it was able to have. A positive influence was revealed, translated into a high degree of satisfaction, good perception of the advising and of the program by other people in the field. The attitude itself of the community fluctuated between favorable and very favorable toward the program. Furthermore, the contribution of the program in the assistance to the overcoming of personal difficulties, increase of scientific knowledge, decrease of costs for attending the course and aid in the qualitative improvement of the education of the province, was evaluated, with frankly positive results (Batista, 1982).

As this study presents it, if the program in its first stage showed some skepticism, this attitude turned then into optimism on the continuity of the program.

And, what at first did not go farther than being an experiment or a possibility, today has become a reality and achievement. In the same way changes have occurred in the professorate, the majority of which manifested approval and wish of collaboration. Each day the acceptance is greater, provided reservations are taken with respect to quality. The confidence in innovation also gains more strength and more stability, which will redound positively to the achievement of the educational and social objectives proposed by the same program, even if multiple problems owed to its character of innovation and to changing situations to the inside of the university subsist.

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